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NTRODUCTION – ISLAM IN HISTORY AND POLITICS: A SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

Asim Roy and Howard Brasted
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FROM THOMAS W. ARNOLD TO SAMUEL HUNTINGTON THE WEST'S relentless and curious fascination with Islam remains unabated. Underlying this general interest there has been a special demand – almost a craving in the West for a particular type of popular literature aimed at 'decoding' Islam and offering a thorough *exposé* of the religion and its believers. In recent times the influential Jamaican writer of Indian ancestry, V. S Naipaul, proved commercially very successful in feeding this Western appetite with his successive best sellers: *An Islamic Journey* (1982), and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (1998). In Paris, for example, Sonia Rykiel's fancy window displays on the Boulevard St Germain were, reportedly, 'filled with copies of the French translation of *Beyond Belief*, intermixed with the scarves, belts and handbags.'[1]

Both of Naipaul's major works share his central theme – carefully and selectively constructed and illustrated with the help of a series of contrived interviews – that the problem of Islam in the modern world is:

> the confusion of a people of high medieval culture awakening to oil and money, a sense of power and violation and a knowledge of a great new encircling (Western) civilisation. It was to be rejected; at the same time it was to be depended on.

The flaw that ran through Islamic history, he affirms, is that:

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1 Edward W.Said, 'An intellectual catastrophe', *Al Ahram Weekly*, Issue 389, 6-12 August 1998 [review of V. S. Naipaul's *Beyond Belief*].

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> to the political issues it raised it offered no political or practical solution. It offered only the faith. It offered only the Prophet, who would settle everything – but who had ceased to exist. This political Islam was rage, anarchy.

To this pet theme of a Huntington-esque prognostication of an apocalyptic clash of civilisations between Islam and the West, Naipaul returns nearly two decades later to add a new and equally debatable postulation about the sources of modern Muslim predicament – a postulation that is relevant to the concerns of this volume. In *Beyond Belief*, Naipaul appears obsessed with the issue of authenticity in Islam. He attributes the problem posed by non-Arab Muslims to the fact of their 'original sin' of conversion, and their consequent predicament to their unauthenticity as converts.

This acquired religion for the converts, in Naipaul's perception, cuts them off from their roots and makes them hollow, confused, imitative and incompetent. Such a reductive thesis, based on a misapprehension of Muslim history, culture, politics and geography, totally misses or denies the dynamics involved in the making of Islamic civilisation. Naipaul's, however, is only a much exaggerated, and distorted projection of a conventional – though misconceived and mythical – view of a normative and monolithic Islam vigorously propagated in our own times not only in the West but also by the fundamentalists, Islamicists and the 'mujahidin' of political Islam.

The conventional perception of Islam in its non-Arab settings is indeed grossly inadequate and misleading. Underlying the problem is a wider and vital question of perspective appropriate for studying a Muslim group in a regional setting. In the absence of much significant empirical research in the area of South Asian Islam, its study has very largely been dominated by the normative or macro vision of the traditional Islamists and the Orientalists, which is firmly rooted in the notion of a monolithic Islam or a world-Islam, defined essentially in textual terms of the Sunni orthodoxy. Proceeding from this *a priori* position, it is easy to view the empirical realities of regional Islam through the prism of this idealised and abstract norm and hence to discard them as 'folk' or 'popular' aberrations; their practitioners are likewise dumped as 'half converts' or 'nominal' or 'statistical' Muslims.

The inescapable implication of this approach in terms of sifting 'good' from 'bad' Muslims, may be endorsed by some as a legitimate differentiation, but is likely to be treated by others as a pointless and narrow academic exercise. It is a patently restrictive approach that begins with a 'definition' of a religion and rejects everything that fails to measure up to this idealised standard. A much more meaningful exercise is of course to 'find' the religion in the life and world of the believer.

In its empirical development, no system of beliefs and practices could be divorced from its spatial-social context. The social and cultural mores of

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believers invest particular meanings and symbolism into those beliefs and practices as far as possible as a means of accommodating them to their *weltanschauung*. The rest of their previous cultural baggage is left to coexist, generally harmoniously, with their new acquisitions. A student of this phenomenon is more meaningfully challenged to unravel this complex interface between the old inheritance and the new acquisition. Islam's encounter with Bengal, for instance, has its own specific social and cultural contexts which proved seminal in recasting Islam into its distinctive regional syncretistic mould. In Bengal, Islam has not been a 'primary' but a 'secondary' culture, that is, exogenous and not indigenous to the region. Moreover, Islam has not been a 'single' or the only 'great tradition' since it entered a land which was not culturally virgin, and encountered an already long-established indigenous great tradition.

These are vital considerations in the regional development of Islam.[2] The disproportionate emphasis placed on the theme of unity, to the exclusion of the role and place of variety, in Islam has not only served to distort a remarkably protean historical process, but also reduced Islamic development to a flat and linear process. Islam and Islamic studies have been the poorer for this. A great civilisation is not made within the narrow and rigid frame of a monolithic belief and social system. Neither ideology nor life could work in disjunction and separation from each other. It is the infinitely complex and creative forms of continual interaction between the ideal and the actual that made Islam a rich, vital, living and great civilisation, and it is precisely this that constitutes the challenge for students of Islam to capture the breadth, elasticity, tolerance and creativity in the process of development of historical Islam.

Even the belated recognition of the intrusive presence of region, in the perception of the champions of monolithic Islam, has been commonly and conveniently accommodated within a notion of dichotomous Islam in South Asia – a cleavage popularly expressed in terms of 'high', 'scriptural' or 'orthodox' Islam on the one hand, and 'popular', 'living' or 'folk' Islam on the other. The changing perception and understanding of this particular issue between the conventional orthodox position and its recent revisionist critique has received particular attention in the separate contribution of Asim Roy to this volume.[3] The common perception of the dichotomous nature of Indian Islam is undisputed. It is, however, the explanations of the divergences – primarily offered at the academic level – that have been steadily emerging as dubious and deficient. The predominant attitude and approach seem to involve discarding everything that fails to measure up to the norms and

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2 Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1983); also his *Islam in South Asia. A Regional Perspective* (New Delhi, South Asia Publishers, 1996).

3 Asim Roy, 'Impact of Islamic Revival and Reform in Colonial Bengal and Bengal Muslim Identity: A Revisit', *South Asia*, n.s., Vol. XXII, Special Issue (1999), pp. 39-77.

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prescriptions of 'scriptural' Islam, into the shadowy and bottomless pit of 'folk' or 'popular' Islam. This again is, in its turn, traced to the logic of 'incomplete conversion', which we contest.

We have raised serious questions about the usefulness and academic merit of labelling certain Muslims, particularly in the context of South Asia, as 'half converts' or 'nominal Muslims'. To call a Muslim something less than a Muslim, or even worse a counterfeit Muslim, is a value judgment and not a description or analysis of the meaning of being a Muslim from the point of view of those who call themselves Muslims and claim the religion as their own. Does genuine Islam exist only in some pristine Arabist form? Religious life is a complex whole – a baggage full of myriad and diverse objects, all drawn from their complex and heterogenous source itself, that is, life. And very much in the sense of 'the web of life', there is an underlying unity, coherence and purpose that, in the ultimate analysis, could only have been meaningful in the minds of the believing individuals. Further, for this particular academic school of thought the operative process of Islamisation has been rather simple, uniform, unilinear and unidirectional; that is to say, an unvarying and continuous process of transition and transformation from 'heterodoxy' to 'orthodoxy', or from 'little' to 'great' tradition. In the light of many recent studies such a position has now become untenable. The emerging revisionist perspective canvasses a more complex pattern of interrelationship between the so-called orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Islam, one that is both complementary rather than confronting, and complex rather than flat and uniform.

The revisionist perception uncovers the variety, subtlety, complexity, and dynamism of the highly protean process of Islamization in South Asia. It does this, as suggested above, primarily by pulling down the time-honoured notional barricade between the so-called 'orthodox' and 'heterodox' Islam, which has been raised and sustained uncritically by the academic orthodoxy on South Asian Islam. In its existential, historical and living ramifications, regional Islam commanded a great deal more elasticity, plurality, tolerance and accommodation than apprehended and allowed by its orthodox observers. The issue is clear: we argue that it is patently wrong to deny the validity of every development in Islam that is not easily accommodated within the framework of an 'ideal monolithic orthodoxy,' defined essentially in Sunni scriptural terms. The Islam as practised by millions of believers in South Asia clearly emerges in our collection of essays with much greater elasticity, flexibility, tolerance, accommodative spirit, richness and diversity than is catered for in the orthodox view. Paradoxically, the doctrinaire and idealised model of Islamization seeks to save Islam from what it sees as its principal weaknesses, by in fact turning away from where the real strengths of Islam lay – its dynamism and creativity at the empirical level.

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II

This Special Issue of *South Asia* is the third in recent years in which the themes of Islamic identity and communal conflict have figured prominently. The sudden rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the dramatic storming and destruction of a Muslim mosque, the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992, led to a wide-ranging exploration of the import of these events in the 1994 Special Issue: 'After Ayodhya: The BJP and the Indian Political System'.[4] This was followed in 1995 by 'North India: Partition and Independence', which revisited, nearly fifty years on, the cataclysmic history of 1947, if from the hitherto neglected close-up angle of the massacres and upheaval that tragically accompanied the division of the sub-continent.[5] Departing from the traditional focus of nationalist campaigns and high political negotiations which inform much of the historiography of independence, this volume addressed not only the human dimension of partition – what it meant to be a Hindu, Muslim or Sikh caught up at the ground level in the creation of India and Pakistan – but also the strong continuities which survived the traumas of violent separation. 1947 was not debated all over again, but the remembrances of its victims were brought into the story for practically the first time.

'Islam in History and Politics: A South Asian Perspective' canvasses the background dynamics which were variously involved and played out in 1992 and 1947 respectively. In a more direct and more expansive way it engages with the meaning of Muslim community and the changing nature of Muslim consciousness, from the colonial state to the contemporary states which replaced it, in a region which contains the largest concentration of Muslims in the world. For the very first time at a major Australian conference South Asian Islamic culture became the central and contested area of inquiry for the South Asia section of the Asian Studies Association of Australia Biennial Conference, which was held at La Trobe University, Melbourne, on 8-11 July 1996. Sponsored jointly by the Australia-India Council, the National Centre for South Asian Studies and the South Asian Studies Association, the conference brought together a number of the world's leading scholars of Muslim history, society and/or the communal problem in South Asia – including Paul Brass, Javeed Alam, Mushirul Hasan, Zoya Hasan, Barbara Metcalf, Tom Metcalf, Gyan Pandey and Francis Robinson. They were joined by many Australian and New Zealand-based scholars who also work and

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4 See 'After Ayodhya: The BJP and the Indian Political System', *South Asia*, Special Issue, Vol. XVII, 1994, 229 pp. This was subsequently published, with additional articles, as John McGuire, Peter Reeves and Howard Brasted (eds), *Politics of Violence. From Ayodhya to Behrampada* (New Delhi, Sage, 1996), 300 pp.

5 See 'North India: Partition and Independence', *South Asia*, Special Issue, Vol. XVIII, 1995, 212 pp. This was subsequently published, after revision, as D. A. Low and Howard Brasted (eds), *Freedom, Trauma, Continuities, Northern India and Independence* (New Delhi, Sage, 1998), 237 pp.

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publish in this field. In all, over fifteen panels and over fifty papers were committed to the symposium. Appropriately launching it, a round-table discussion on the phenomenon of Islamisation and the many challenges confronting Muslim societies in both yesterday's and today's world sketched the co-ordinates of the inquiry.

The papers, which are published in this volume, are a sample rather than a particular selection of those formally presented at the conference. Papers which were offered as very preliminary progress reports of projects just started, or had been committed to studies nearing completion were either not considered or left out as wished by their contributors. However, in some cases abstracts were provided and these have been included at the end of the Special Issue to give a fuller view of the ground covered in discussion.

With South Asian Islam never in its history a replica of Arabist Islam, what did Islamisation amount to and what form has it taken in response to challenges which both tested and changed the way Muslims understood and practised their religion? As Francis Robinson points out in a key-note address, South Asian Muslims, as Muslims everywhere in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, experienced religious change of revolutionary significance, in many ways not unlike that of the Reformation in Europe. In the sub-continent the process of change was not uniform and varied according to the inspiration and different prescriptions of the movements driving it: of the Mujahidin, the Faraizis, Deoband, the Ahl-i-Hadiths, and Aligarh in the nineteenth century; and of the Jamiyat-ul Ulama, the Tabligh-i Jamaat, the Jamaat-i Islami, and the modernists of the twentieth century. The resulting change involved a major shift in the emphasis in Islamic belief from an other-worldly to a this-worldly Islam. In short, the focus of Muslim piety was transferred from the next world to this. Instead of waiting for God to intercede for mankind on earth, individual Muslims began to assume responsibility themselves for creating Islamic society on earth. This responsibility was to fall heaviest on women. Robinson's exploration of this-worldly Islam reveals that a new emphasis was placed on finding the right way to salvation, individualism was stressed and the Ulama lost some of their monopoly of power. Reflecting on where all this could lead, Robinson moots the possibility of the door to unbelief opening and Islam, as Christianity before it, heading off down a secularising path.

For Javeed Alam the development of this-worldly Islam had already led to the destruction of an older more tolerant Islam, which over time had accommodated and synthesised elements of Muslim and Hindu world views. The unique genius of India had worked to evolve modes of thinking and living – a composite culture – which had survived as long as outside agencies had left it alone. They had not, which was the problem. This composite culture, which was of a pre-reflective kind experienced predominantly at the folk level, was essentially frail, and certainly never robust enough to

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withstand intervention from orthodox elements who felt threatened by it. Crystallising in the broad shapes of either Deoband or Aligarh, interventions began to dissolve the common features of syncretistic Islam. Un-Islamic practices were targeted by dominant élites invoking Quranic tradition as a means of acquiring and exercising new sources of power. Once politicisation occurred Muslims began drawing away from the rest of society – the creation of a Muslim 'other' being in this sense a two-way, not simply a Hindu generated, process. Putting this development into context Alam points to the triggering effect of British colonial rule and the Hindu reaction to it.

To the notion of the sharpness of change and reformulation of Islam in colonial South Asia that underlies both Robinson's and Alam's contentions, Asim Roy's paper represents a more cautious, critical and qualified appraisal. From a revisionary perspective Roy examines the bases of syncretistic culture, the phenomenon of Islamisation and the creation of an exclusivist Muslim identity within the context of the nineteenth and twentieth century revivalist movements in Bengal. To the standard interpretation of the processes at work in Islamic revivalism and the direction taken by ensuing Islamisation, Roy supplies two correctives. First, he restores Islamic ideology to a position of salience within the revivalist program, by redeeming it from an analytical muddle which results from an uncritical assumption, in much of the current scholarship, of a secular-religious divide. While conceding that Muslims responded more readily to the social, economic and political, than to the religious, aspects of revivalism – the prevailing line of argument – he points to the Islamic relevance and justification for those apparent 'secular' concerns. Seeking 'Islamic' explanations for Islamic mobilisation, Roy restores the linkage between the spiritual and the temporal in Islam which had tended to become separated in scholarly treatments. Second, Roy suggests that the conventional narrative of Islamisation was seriously deficient. For it started with the false premise that pre-revivalist Islam was un-Islamic, and it ended with the dubious assumption that post-revivalist Islam was all scriptural and normative. This, he argues, essentially ignored both the authenticity and resilience of local custom-based syncretistic Islam – of Islam in its distinctive regional mould. It follows for Roy that the unfolding of Islamisation as a uniform, monolithic and linear movement, which transformed a folk or low, to a high, tradition and culminated in the triumphant seizure of a truncated Bengal in 1947, seriously masked a much more complex and diverse, much less romantic, and extremely uneven history.

The difficulties associated with identifying the causative factors promoting separatist over syncretistic Islam are equally attested to in the four papers of Kate Brittlebank, Ian Catanach, Ian Copland and Dominique-Sila Khan and Zawahir Moir. In each a very different setting and set of circumstances are chosen for measuring the presence of Islamic consciousness and the impulses behind Islamic response.

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Kate Brittlebank examines the British conquest of Mysore and Tipu Sultan's unsuccessful if legendary resistance to it in the light of Chris Bayly's poignant statement that no 'identifiable' Muslim, or indeed Sikh or Hindu identity existed prior to the mid-nineteenth century. There was a fragmented form of consciousness but the term *mentalité* better described this. While Tipu died in the defence of Mysore, and is remembered as a Muslim martyr, Brittlebank concludes that Bayly is basically right. Muslim solidarity could not be discounted altogether, but it was never sufficiently strong to overcome self-interest in this case. Muslims simply did not identify with Tipu as a Muslim leader in defence of an agreed or shared Muslim identify.

Nor it seems did Muslims consciously coalesce as a united, homogeneous community a century later when challenged by the Plague of 1897/8 and British measures to counteract it. At the time the British, taking heed of a warning from Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, were quick to espy a distinctive, cohesive, anti-British 'Muslim' response to British attempts to control the outbreak. In Catanach's study this is not borne out by the evidence, little sign of a formidable Muslim front being found. Plague fears might have formed part of the background to the rise of the messianic Ahmadiyya movement in the Punjab. And some Muslims might have been conditioned by a traditional outlook to view the Plague as a 'mercy' sent by God, from which they therefore should not flee. Catanach confirms what the British Administration were to concede after the event, that there was no accepted chain of command amongst Muslims and consequently no single spiritual leader with the authority to make binding pronouncements. Some Ulama declared in favour of keeping the Plague at a remedial distance, others insisted that Muslims stay put. Catanach finds that when different Muslims responded differently this largely depended on where they resided and who they were. For the most part the religious reaction of Punjabi villages – whether Muslim or Hindu – was basically similar. Indeed, Catanach glimpses a degree of syncretism here, particularly at the medical level, although he declines to push, or to quantify, this. A common 'Indic' civilisation might have been shared, but so also and critically was a 'pragmatic commonsense'. A great deal of ambiguity and inconsistency made it difficult to detect a distinctive Muslim response to the plague.

Ian Copland draws attention to the Meo revolt of 1932 as the ideal context in which to explore the motivating capacity of Islamic doctrine to inspire an agrarian insurgency along communal lines. On the face of it the Meo revolt was triggered by the great Depression of 1929 and grounded in the discriminatory tax regime of the Hindu ruler of Alwar, Jey Singh. All the classic symptoms of an economic agitation by middle peasants were present. Yet, although their grievances were economically based the Meo's began attacking Hindu shops and shrines. That they did so was despite the fact that theirs was a very syncretistic brand of Islam – they celebrated the Hindu festivals of Divali and Dasehra for instance and did not observe Purdah. Up

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to this point they had also lived in communal harmony. For Copland part of the explanation for the revolt taking a communal form resides in the Meo's communal solidarity and their status as Muslims. But he suggests that it is probably better explained by the intervention of outside Muslim and Hindu forces for a range of motives. Where the moral community of the Alwar Meo villages was destroyed – with tragic consequences in 1947 – Copland surmises that it was engineered not from within but from without, precisely the scenario Javeed Alam highlights.

Outside agency is unmistakably operative in the next paper by Dominique-Sila Khan and Zawahir Moir. In an intriguing case study they bring the study of composite culture and its demise up to the present by investigating what appears to be a very peculiar communal struggle over the survival or transformation of a long-standing syncretistic tradition. The tradition in question features the Satpanth – a sect of Nizari Ismailism founded by Imam Shah in the fifteenth century – which centres its faith on a shrine at Pirana, near Ahmedabad, in Gujarat. Consisting mainly of converted Hindu Patels, a major agricultural community, the Imamshahis avoided persecution from their Sunni overlords by retaining outwardly some of their Hindu customs and practices. In almost chameleon-like fashion they were enabled through the Shia practice of *taqiyya* to conceal or disguise their newly acquired identity; or identities where subsequent schisms occurred. Likewise, the founders of the sect and their descendants, the Sayyids, took on the appearance of Sufis. In this way the Satpanthis were able to share and preserve a sacred place to the end of the nineteenth century without detection or interference. However, after that, and particularly in the post-independence period, it became increasingly difficult for them to profess openly a religion which appeared neither Muslim nor Hindu. In response especially to the strictures of the Hindu fundamentalist movement some Patels sought to re-Hinduise the Satpanth, while the Sayyids, backed by other Patels, strove to re-assert their Muslim origins and credentials. In researching what looks like a straight-forward Hindu versus Muslim conflict, Khan and Moir uncover a far more complex trail of power, money and changing identity.

Central to any discussion of crystallising Muslim identity is Pakistan and what it represented for those Muslims who were persuaded to join it as citizens, and those who rejected it by remaining in India. Was religious culture the key determinant fuelling intense communal hostilities at the time of partition? In his paper Hew McLeod looks to answer this question from the Sikh perspective. Despite a considerable background of commonality – both Sikhs and Muslims were Punjabi, monotheistic, joined by common castes, and members of the multi-communal Unionist Party prior to partition – Tara Singh, the Sikh leader in 1947, had no hesitation in opting decisively for India and proclaiming 'Death to Pakistan'. McLeod discovers that the stand taken by Tara Singh on behalf of his community reflected a deep-seated Sikh enmity towards Muslims, the roots of which could be traced back to the

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eighteenth century and the period of the later Gurus. Evidenced in the Sikh *rahit namas*, or codes of belief and conduct, this anti-Muslim feeling is held in check until the events of 1946/7 re-expose and ferociously unleash it.

Taking his cue from Ayesha Jalal in her revisionary study of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the politics of partition, Adeel Khan advances a highly critical assessment of the role of Islam in first the creation of Pakistan and second later, belated attempts to construct a national identity. Just as Islam failed to establish the basis of the state in 1947, so successive waves of Islamisation failed to unite its constituent ethnic and regional cultures behind a coherent inclusive ideology. Jinnah's instrumental appropriation of Islam had something to do with this, bequeathing a Pakistan which was neither secular nor Islamic, but was, as Rafiq Zakaria poignantly describes it, a totally 'ambivalent' state. When later rulers – whether military or civilian – also invoked Islam to legitimise their respective regimes, they were no more successful in clarifying Pakistan's Islamic status or in constructing an integrative Muslim identity as the basis of nationhood. The breaking away of the eastern Bengali wing in 1971 to form Bangladesh was a striking warning that went unheeded. The Islamisation that followed continued to privilege a Muhajir-Punjabi majority at the expense of all other ethnic, regional minorities. In Adeel Khan's reckoning what this has created has been a 'fierce' or discriminatory nation, rather than a fraternal or democratic nation of equal composite parts. The political Islam of the élites, no matter which face it presented, took scant note of, and bore little resemblance to, cultural Islam, the Islam lived at the popular level.

Samina Yasmeen also examines the process of Islamisation in Pakistan, but with respect to the 1990s and its impact on both religious minorities and women. She argues that despite the 'tokenism' associated with General Zia-ul-Haq's push to strengthen the Islamic credentials of his government, a major shift in Pakistan's orientation occurred. For the first time since independence Pakistan moved into a 'traditionalist' orbit and away from the 'modernist' conception of a secular, Muslim polity. Having been distanced from the process, a number of Islamic political groups and parties – among them Mawdudi's Jamaat-i Islami which was especially courted – came to play an interesting role in shaping, or rather reshaping, national identity. Acquiring a life and impetus of its own at the societal level, the late twentieth century Islamic revivalism decidedly narrowed the ambivalences of 1947, but seriously widened the bounds of discrimination. As Pakistan moved from being a state for Muslims to becoming an Islamic state, different criteria of citizenship began to emerge. Citizens were no longer considered equal. A hierarchy based on religion, race, and gender influenced by notions of 'good' or 'bad', practising or non-practising Muslims started to form. In Yasmeen's view these changes have demonstrated serious implications for the stability of the state. Sectarianism has taken off, lawlessness has become rife, and religious minorities are being relegated to a position of 'non-citizens'. For

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women the signs are particularly ominous, with their rights, responsibilities and position in society under increasing review. The prospect of women being treated as 'lesser citizens', if nothing is done to reverse the trend, appears imminent.

Rounding off the collection are the papers of Charles Borges and Hedayetul Huq, which in their different ways touch on the issue of Muslim-Christian relations in South Asia. Borges suggests that with Indian Islam confronted by the rising power of Hindutva, the time is ripe for the Muslim community to enter into a Christian-Muslim dialogue as a means of mediating its situation. While historically Christian-Muslim encounters have been sparse, the most notable exchange taking place in the sixteenth century between Akbar and Clement VIII, the two religions share much theological common ground. Borges thus sees the possibility for a more tolerant understanding and less antagonistic identities being negotiated.

A similar need for dialogue is demonstrated in Hedayetul Huq's study, although for very different reasons. Huq analyses the delicate and increasingly strained relations between foreign, predominantly Christian, voluntary organisations and Muslim communities in Bangladesh over the last thirty years. For their part, the NGOs seldom communicate with the Muslim peoples they set out to help, and never consult them when the projects they decide to fund are determined. These are invariably selected according to Christian, rather than Muslim understandings of development. On the Muslim side, no non-Christian has been appointed to head any NGO, the lines of authority tending to exclude Muslims altogether. Muslim suspicions linger about the cultural intentions of NGOs who routinely devote the bulk of their resources to the younger generation and to minority groups. This impression is not helped by the fact that the Ulama – a potent force in rural Bangladesh – are kept at arms length as the prospective enemy. The inference emerges clearly from Huq's paper that NGOs need to rethink their objectives and the strategies to implement them if they are to avoid engendering a fundamentalist-inspired opposition.

In this volume's exploration of South Asian Islam and changing Muslim identities, one thing emerges quite clearly. A great deal more detailed research, particularly at the level of local, regional, popular Islam is required. These studies have made an important start but they have exposed a number of questions which would benefit from more extensive probing over a wider landscape:

- What has Islamisation meant for ordinary Muslims in South Asia over a long stretch in time and space?
- To what extent has outside agency transformed their beliefs and practices?

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- Has syncretistic Islam already become a relic of the historical past, yielding place to a normative and global Islam?

Khan's and Moir's finding, that outside the power plays staged and fought at Pirana ordinary devotees continue to worship at Imam Shah's shrine, would suggest otherwise. While the changing face of Islam is more easily countenanced from above, the challenge for researchers is to map this change from below.

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